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### Journal Item

#### How to cite:

Riach, Kathleen and Brewis, Joanna (2019). The organizational gendering of adulting: negotiating age and gender in the workplace. *Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Equality and Diversity*, 5(1)

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

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Version: Version of Record

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## **The organizational gendering of adulting: negotiating age and gender in the workplace**

### **ABSTRACT**

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While growing up is recognized as an important transitional period that lays the foundations for future gendered expectations, behaviours and trajectories, we know little of how this process is negotiated within the context of specific organizations. This paper advances life course approaches to age and employment through developing the popular cultural concept of ‘adulting’ as a lens through which to understand the ongoing process of growing up in the context of work, and how ageing traverses gender in this regard and vice versa. Drawing on 31 interviews with employees from a UK hedge fund, it presents three analytical motifs to help illuminate the gendered negotiation and reproduction of adulting at work. These concern: how men and women entered the hedge fund and progressed within it; decisions around starting a family; and how parenthood is navigated in this organization. Situating our findings within relevant debates surrounding gender, age and organizational life, we argue that adulting provides a way of articulating some of the complex ways that gender manifests in the formative stages of men and women’s career trajectories. Equally, the broader destabilizing of emerging adulthood notwithstanding, our analysis also suggests the enduring seduction and attraction of ‘stabilizing’ gendered ageing practices, shedding some light on why they might continue to persist.

**Keywords:** adulting; ageing; career; gender; growing up

### **INTRODUCTION**

There is now significant evidence that workforce gender inequalities are a cumulative phenomenon. For example, pay and seniority gaps between men and women intensify as they grow older (Eurostat, 2018), exacerbated by the cumulative advantage that men experience in the workplace due to both economic and cultural forces that favour them. These include men being rewarded for experience more than women (Bielby and Bielby, 1996). Some research attributes this to the cross-cutting effects of gender and age in employment, providing examples of how these

Submitted on the 25 07 2018

Accepted on the 05 09 2019

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social differences “have multiplicative, reinforcing effects” (Joy Mighty, cited in Kamenou *et al.*, 2013, p. 400; also see Duncan and Loretto, 2004). This is particularly stark in qualitative accounts of older women’s experiences (Trethewey, 2001; Irni, 2009; Jyrkinen and McKie, 2012). More quantitatively-inclined research also highlights cumulative disadvantage for female employees as they grow older, which may be buttressed by other forms of disadvantage such as ethnic minority status (Barnett *et al.*, 2000; Fernandez-Mateo, 2009).

Ageing is a slippery concept to theorize or empirically explore: it cannot be apprehended as a seamless, unidirectional transition from one defined stage to the next. Although classic life stage approaches (eg, Erikson, 1950; Havighurst, 1972) have been substantially critiqued as both inflexible and gender-blind, age-related categorization is still common in organizations; mainly through the persistence of shorthand proxies to capture lived experience over time. Consider for example the ‘age-organizing’ of cohorts on different pension schemes and employment contracts or, less visibly, expectations around seniority-based pay or upward career trajectories (Riach, 2015). Elsewhere, life course approaches have argued that this form of organizing is the result of individual lives being situated in broader social, historical and cultural contexts (Hockey and James, 2003). Through this lens, organizational ageing and age inequality as phenomena must “be viewed dynamically as the consequence of past experience and future expectation as well as the integration of individual motive and external constraint” (Giele and Elder, 1998: 19). But, although studies of age and employment have commented on the experiences of particular age groups, we still know little about ageing as a process of ongoing negotiation in the workplace. And while scholars have pointed to the ways age and gender criss-cross each other for older employees (eg, Krekula, 2007; Irni, 2009; Riach *et al.*, 2015), there has been less concern as to how social and organizational norms need to be constantly negotiated by younger professionals. In particular, we have little idea about how ‘becoming an adult’ is coupled with organizational expectations, or how this process might be intimately related to gender in ways that shape professional and social trajectories.

We contend that organizational and occupational cultures are one place where these gendered/ ageing dynamics are cultivated and reproduced. For this reason, we need to understand more about the symbols, behaviours and rituals associated with ‘growing up’ in particular workplaces. In this paper we take a life course approach and extend the concept of ‘adulthood’ that has emerged as popular in youth culture over the past 10 years to a phenomenon that is both socially *and organizationally* situated. Specifically, we focus on the interplay between gender and age in the formative years of young professionals working at the pseudonymous London hedge fund HFUK. McDowell and Court (1994), McDowell (1997), Czarniawska (2005, 2008), Ho (2009) and Madden (2012), amongst others, have provided powerful accounts of the financial sector as both structurally and culturally masculinist. Specific examples include Goldman Sachs who continue to be the target of a long-running class action based on charges of favouring male Associates and Vice Presidents to the detriment of their female colleagues (Dugan, 2018; Stempel, 2018). Further, recent gender pay gap reports from financial institutions in the City of London indicate that Lloyds



of London has a 27.7% divide in pay; with the Bank of England coming in only slightly lower at 21% (Oxtoby, 2018). Other cultural features of the sector, such as male to female ratios and long hours, have also been shown to increase attrition intentions and rates amongst women when they have children (Cha, 2013; Damaske *et al.*, 2014; Kaminski and Geisler, cited in Cech and Blair-Loy, 2014: 93). This industry therefore provides a valuable setting in which to explore how gender and age norms affect the ways in which careers are planned, navigated and experienced.

In our analysis, we make inroads into connecting norms around gender and ageing in specific organizational cultures and understanding their effects on career expectations, possibilities and paths. Specifically, we foreground the adulting project as played out against a particular gender regime in the institutional space of HFUK and financial services more broadly (Connell, 2009: 72; also see Williams, 2002: 31): one which is not simply characterized by sexism but rather marked normative assumptions surrounding reproduction and parenting in the financial services. Thus we focus on how men and women experience growing up through the negotiation of gender norms woven into the everyday practices of work in this sector, to exemplify Kamenou *et al.*'s (2013: 400 – our emphasis) argument that “the interplay of factors such as ethnicity, *gender*, class, *age*, and disability can create a multiplicity of experiences”.

Our paper is structured into four sections. The first introduces the concept of ‘adulting’ as a means of understanding the always-unfinished process of growing up in a work environment. After introducing our empirical study, the third section presents three key insights into the gendered nature of adulting, and thus of workplace trajectories, at HFUK. Finally, we discuss some of the consequences that arise from the data analysis in our discussion and our conclusion.

### **AGE AND GENDER AS LIFE COURSE MARKERS IN GROWING UP**

The concept of growing up lies at the heart of life course studies. The ritualistic dimensions of ageing are well documented, and studies of particular cohorts highlight symbolic and material negotiations surrounding educational qualifications, financial independence, employment, property ownership, partnering and parenting (Hockey and James, 2002; Furlong and Cartmel, 2007; Utrata, 2011; King, 2013). Extant scholarship also suggests that ageing is increasingly being navigated in new ways, in the Global North at least. For example, marriage is certainly no longer the central life event shaping sexual relationships, parenthood or paid employment (Aronson, 2008: 59, following Coontz). Indeed there has been a gradual legitimization of a diverse range of intimate relationships, as well as the growth of single person households and ‘singlehood’ *per se* (Holmes, 2004; Jagger, 2005; Hamilton *et al.*, 2006; Budgeon, 2008; de Janasz *et al.*, 2013). Similarly, women (and especially the graduates and professionals amongst them) now tend to have children later or to abjure motherhood altogether (Park, 2005; Stöbel-Richter *et al.*, 2005; Wood and Newton, 2006; Hadfield *et al.*, 2007; Koropeckyj-Cox and Pendell, 2007; Aronson, 2008; Hamilton and Armstrong, 2009). With these socioeconomic shifts as a backdrop, the so-called ‘destandardization’ or ‘deinstitutionalization’ of the life course seems to afford opportunities to



navigate traditional adult milestones such as completion of higher education, establishing a career, marriage, parenthood, and so on with more fluidity than ever before (Mortimer *et al.*, 2008; Johnson and Monserud, 2010: 200). These changes apparently require a reconfiguration of traditional conceptualizations of ageing, particularly the “definition of youth as a short transition phase and its understanding as a ‘moratorium’” (Bendit, 2008: 360).

One reason for this emerging navigation of ageing is the shifting role of work and its influence on behavioural norms and expectations at particular points in the life course (Riach, 2015). Claims around new modes of career trajectory such as protean or boundaryless careers abound, although rarely “alter, a linear, upward understanding” of career (Sabelis and Schilling, 2012: 129). At the same time we have witnessed the rise of flexible work arrangements, career breaks, sabbaticals and later life entrepreneurship, as well as claims that the current cohort of ‘Gen Y’ workers may have to work into their mid-seventies in order to be able to afford retirement (Heally, 1999; Hofäcker, 2010; Baltes and Finkelstein, 2011; Kautonen *et al.*, 2011; Tipping *et al.*, 2012).

These disturbances and developments have gendered effects in and of themselves. Maume and Wilson (2015), for example, discuss the emergence of the new economy – where, *inter alia*, people stay with the same employer for shorter periods of time; where service sector jobs are replacing primary and secondary sector jobs; and where feelings of job insecurity are on the rise. Their analysis suggests it has produced greater polarization between ‘good’ (i.e., highly skilled and remunerated) and ‘bad’ jobs and more wage stagnation across careers, for men at least. Similarly, Kronberg (2014: 308) reminds us that traditional male-dominated industries such as manufacturing have seen a pronounced decline since the 1970s, whereas the female-dominated service industries have grown. However, jobs in the service industries are typically badly paid whereas highly paid and growing sectors such as IT and financial services – our focus here – employ far greater numbers of men. Elsewhere, it is suggested that new modes of career manifest differently for women than for men, and can simply exacerbate their unequal position in the labour market through reinforcing gender differences in work-family tensions (Valcour and Tolbert, 2003; Sabelis and Schilling, 2013). Overall, these new modes of career may negatively affect women’s perceived level of success (Kovalenko and Mortelmans, 2014).

Then again, despite conventional markers of growing up having blurred and intertwined, traditional gender roles seemingly continue to influence the occupational trajectories of women and men. Studies highlight that fatherhood is still strongly aligned with breadwinner status, and undertaken as a somewhat ‘semi-detached’ activity; and that parenting tends to be interpreted in an organizational context as mothering. Equally, women are more likely to be responsible for outsourcing domestic duties in dual-career households and they also pay careful attention to how they portray their motherhood at work (Ainsworth and Cutcher, 2008; Kamenou, 2008; Wharton *et al.*, 2008; Tyler and Cohen, 2010; Beauregard, 2011; Eräranta and Moisander, 2011; Miller, 2011). Moreover, as Özbilgin *et al.* (2011: 178) point out, despite the burgeoning of different forms of intimate relationships and, relatedly, different forms of family structure including the ‘child-



free’ variant, those adopting these newer lifestyles may well still be regarded as “travellers between cultures” or even “enemies of the established order”.

Conventionally masculinist cultures, like those in STEM subjects in universities for example, also mean that female employees are more prone than men to suggest they will leave their jobs because of work-family conflict, although men do experience constraints in this regard as well (Kaminski and Geisler, cited in Cech and Blair-Loy, 2014: 93; Damaske *et al.*, 2014). Similarly, Cha (2013) analyses secondary data pertaining to male-dominated jobs in which work hours typically exceed 50 a week, including prestigious occupations such as medicine, law, science, and architecture. Her results show a clear correlation between gender imbalance, long hours and female attrition. These values, norms and practices may be manufactured and reproduced through various sector-, occupation- or organization-specific mechanisms (Whittington, 2011).

## UNDERSTANDING ADULTING AS AN ORGANIZATIONALLY SITUATED PRACTICE

Although age and employment studies highlight that the gendered and aged dynamics we see at play in life course markers have particular consequences for women, there has been more of a focus on the experiences of gendered ageism as experienced by mid-life and older women (eg, Itzin and Newman, 2003; Hodges, 2012; Jyrkinen and McKie, 2012; Tomlinson and Colgan, 2014). Moreover, because youth studies often focus on the move from education to work, there is little or no exploration of formative transitions *once located within* the work environment, despite Blatterer’s (2007) suggestion that adulthood remains an unstable and contested concept. In our exploration of age-related transitions at work through a gendered lens, we deploy the notion of adulting. Adulting has now become firmly rooted in the popular imagination, with blogs (Brown, K, n.d.), cartoons (Rebolini, 2016) and even a TV series (Marchbank, 2016) employing the term. In these settings, we see a focus on the stumbling back and forth as people try to negotiate the terrain of being a ‘grown up’. The central themes all coalesce around the idea that the journey into adulthood is far from a seamless and one-way evolution, echoing debates in youth studies (Furlong, 2012).

We suggest that adulting as a concept has the potential to speak to part of a larger ‘re-imagining age’ movement, of discourses which seek to capture the negotiation of new dynamics of ageing in the Global North alongside more traditional conceptions. Adulting is a term originating in the natural sciences, and refers to the stage at which an animal becomes capable of reproduction. Researchers in the social sciences and the humanities later adopted it to index the stages, processes or behaviours associated with entering human adulthood. For example, Schroots’ concept of adulting is used as a metaphor to partly capture the lifelong process of socialization (Birren and Schroots, 1984). The term has also been used in history to explain decreases in child labour (Cunningham, 2000; Humphries, 2007), and in literature to document the journeys involved in becoming an adult (Bardari, 2008). By comparison, we take a processual view of adulting,





considering it as a constellation of discourses, practices and subjectivities through which normative social roles are reproduced as well as a process in which individuals negotiate a sense of selfhood against ageing imaginaries. This turn towards focusing on the imaginaries of age is best captured by Blatterer (2007: 784) who argues that the “redefinition of contemporary adulthood can be seen as ‘a struggle for recognition’ ... marked by the assertion of social practice against residual normative ideals”. In this perspective, growing up is not an objective, finite phase but a continual process of becoming. We argue therefore that new systems of configuring selfhood are arising from the changing cultural production of age, and satellite around a process of adulting. As we can see from a quick glance at popular culture, the processes of adulting are intimately related to how we experience gender and sexuality. For example, see the Sarah Andersen cartoons ‘Dating’, ‘When your crush says hi’ and ‘Holding hands’ which Rebolini (2016) reproduces in her BuzzFeed post.

Adulthood thus provides a fruitful lens through which to explore and articulate the relations in and between age and gender in work settings as we move into and through our careers. Extant research already suggests that career-defining terms like ‘success’ may be understood differently by those in different cohorts and delineated by gendered patterns. In Smith-Ruig’s (2009) study of ‘middle adulthood’ accountants in their 30s and 40s, several were both objectively and subjectively plateaued in the sense of their career progression having halted and feeling that “future advancements were limited” (p. 616). Elsewhere Sturges (1999) asserts that the younger women managers in her sample usually defined success as being very competent at one’s job and recognized as such, finding one’s job challenging and stimulating and being able to maintain work-life balance. The older men and women she interviewed, however, tended to understand success as “being able to do things at work which had a tangible and positive effect on the organization they worked for” (p. 246). But our use of adulting moves beyond notions of concrete age groups or stages, and we emphasize that the adulting project informs and is cut across by gendered expectations *in toto*, making it different for men and women across all aspects of their lives. Occupational, sector and organizational norms matter here too, so adulting will vary for employees in different sectors, in different occupations and in different workplaces.

Specifically, we suggest that adulting is not simply a tool of impression management or self-presentation, nor the practices which mark a journey towards a socially accepted idea of adulthood. Rather it can be understood as part of a powerful repertoire of ideals situated within high modernity and the increased autonomy which characterizes an individualized life course. It legitimizes (even advocates) the breaking down of expectations defined by age and perhaps allows us to embrace the idea that ‘failing’ at being adult is a lot more fun than following a pre-defined or traditional trajectory. Adulting therefore differs from other concepts of ageing such as ‘emerging adulthood’ (Arnett, 2004; Bynner, 2005), ‘coming of age’ or ‘transitions to adulthood/ womanhood’ (Williams, 2002; Aronson, 2008) because it de-emphasizes, even erases, the possibility of an endpoint of adulthood. Instead, with the promise of being an adult is never naturalized or fully



inculcated. This is evident in the increasing articulation of adulting in social media spaces, such as the blog *Adulting ... Graciously* (Williams Brown, n.d.). As Williams Brown suggests:

“Sometimes, I wake up in the middle of the night, so sure that I am not an adult and never will be. ‘I’m a sham’, I whisper quietly in the dark. But this is the thing: everyone feels like they’re a sham. Everyone feels like all around them are people who have it together, so why don’t I?” (<http://adultingblog.com/qa>)

This has significant consequences for organizational subjectivities where being an adult is a heavily conditioned and ambiguous form of recognition. So in terms of professional validation or career success, adulting is not so much ‘fake it ‘til you make it’, but ‘fake it ‘til you forget you are faking it’. Or, we would argue, fake it for the most part, but always with the possibility of regression, reversal, misrecognition or reorientation. Moreover, as an organizationally situated project, this is a project that unfolds within the power dynamics of the workplace, where our ongoing adulting projects may be derailed by others (being ‘talked over’ in a meeting, maybe) or triggered by a self-perceived deficiency (eg, failing to offer dissent in the same context). Everyday workplace encounters therefore always have the potential to temporarily puncture any sense in which we are moving steadily towards the imaginary end state or finite and hermetically sealed selfhood of ‘being adult’. Conversely, they may also occur in reverse when someone else unexpectedly hails you as adult (eg, by suggesting that you take on increased responsibility at work). In such instances, being interpellated as (not) an adult calls us into working on and through our adulting projects – which are invariably gendered.

While rarely explicitly addressed in adulting discourses, we suggest that adulting can be a particularly useful heuristic to help us understand the experience of gendered ageing in organizational spaces. To return to Williams Brown’s blog as an example of adulting in practice, we see humorous vodcasts and blogs offering advice about warding off “office creepers” (step 95) and flowcharts recommending how many drinks you should have at a works function (step 27). On the one hand, these appear to challenge gendered expectations surrounding domesticity and to complement contemporary images of the emancipated, successful, young female professional. At the same time, Williams Brown’s successes and failures often passively reproduce, rather than subvert, conventional gendered expectations about what women should aspire to be.

In sum, two key questions emerge if we consider adulting as both a socially *and* organizationally situated project. In what ways is adulting re/produced and embedded in gendered and aged expectations of professional early careers? And how in turn are gendered career trajectories marked by ambivalent and incomplete expectations surrounding being and becoming adult? To explore these questions further, we now turn to our empirical study of men and women in the financial services.





## METHODS

The data used in our analysis are drawn from a five month in-depth study of a London-based hedge fund conducted by Kathleen that originally set to explore the experiences of growing up and older in the financial services industry. HFUK employs between 50 and 70 staff (depending on company performance) and was established in the early 2000s. Its relatively long history was used to explain an older average age amongst staff (37.5) compared to sector norms, and the 3:1 male-female ratio was also seen as atypical in the heavily male-dominated finance industry. Hedge funds are best understood as privately owned investment companies seeking to maximize profits on private investors' funds (see Riach and Cutcher, 2014). To do this, they are able to use a number of financial strategies which are often not available to companies who invest 'public' money (such as high street banks) or other mutual fund operations.

Whilst the dataset includes podcasts made by employees, informal memos, drawings and photographs, our main corpus for analysis in this paper is comprised of 53 qualitative semi-structured interviews which all took place in a private office on site during working hours, as well as fieldnotes from around 150 hours of observation. Interviews focused on people's beliefs and perceptions of age in general and in a professional setting. Kathleen was also interested to explore their aspirations and anxieties as situated in time, encouraging reflection on past experiences, present ambitions and future aspirations. In our attempts to understand adulthood, we focus on the 31 participants who self-identified as being between 25 and 37, which corresponds with the age range in which individuals are most likely to have their first child in England and Wales (Office for National Statistics, 2016). Given that having children is often seen as a threshold for adulthood (Furstenberg *et al.*, 2005), which is also reflected in the narratives of our participants, this was deemed to be an appropriate age range to foreground. At times however we refer to data derived from those outside this age band in order to more fully explore the cultural norms circulating HFUK.

Once the data were transcribed and anonymized by giving individual pseudonyms, initial thematic coding was undertaken using NVivo. In identifying the unequal distribution of certain key themes between the men and women in our sample we then decided to undertake individualized analytical 'portrait' of each employee. This was completed by combining interview transcripts with fieldnotes to explore their past experience, career plans and future objectives. While it was in some ways unsurprising that the narratives of women often differed dramatically from men's in terms of career progression, expectations and future goals, what was notable was that references to age, ageing and time-related constructs also appeared to be delineated by gender as well. The process led to the third step of the analysis that drew on domain analysis (Spradley, 1979) and van Dijk's (2011) discursive techniques to analyse the semantic and textual relationships that may be underpinning the thematic analysis and portraits. This provided a means of exploring relationships between key themes and how they centred around organizational processes or functions. The themes identified: how gendered adulthood as an organizational project was enacted in recruitment,



selection, training and development at the hedge fund; understandings of adulthood and its connections to career progression; and narratives around how parenting is shaped by the demands of work at HFUK. Finally, this analysis led us to identifying three discursive focal points that underpinned the gendered negotiation and reproduction of adulting at work. We discuss these under the headings of “Getting in and getting on” Breadwinners and egg-timers’ and ‘The pram in the hall is the enemy of promise...?’.

Our aim is not to generalize about how adulting is accomplished across all sectors, occupations or organizations. Part of our contribution – as we have stated – is an empirically rich depiction of adulting at HFUK. Moreover, these data were generated through the relational dynamics between Kathleen and the HFUK participants. Her own position as a relatively young, female, single but partnered academic, the fact that she gained access to the fund through a personal contact and the particular point in HFUK’s history where they were facing performance concerns as well as the aforementioned backlash against hedge funds all mean that our data do not offer a unified or ‘truthful’ insight into participants’ lives. At various points, all of these factors were invoked in Kathleen’s exchanges with HFUK employees, as a point of reference, to justify particular opinions or even to explain why certain issues were being discussed ‘more than usual’. As such, we treat the plurality of experiences, beliefs and stories that we were privileged enough to access as indexing a range of shared scripts which help us to elucidate a sociologically-informed understanding of adulting in this context.

## FINDINGS

To begin with, for our participants, the adulting project seemed to be fraught with anxieties. Isla (aged 34) recounted the first time she realized that someone else – in this case a shop assistant - regarded her as grown up:

“[The assistant said] ‘Oh, can you please pass this to the lady?’ and I thought ‘Lady’? So that’s my first ... *Until that point I was fine* and then something was pointing at me saying ‘lady’ ... [laughs]” (our emphasis).

Relatedly, Mia (30) talks of the profound surprise amongst her friends that they have now all achieved chronological adulthood:

“When the good friends that are around my age just kind of [say] ‘Oh God, we’re so old now’, and they’re people I’ve known since we were 20 so, you know, they’re kind of incredulous that we’re kind of adults really!”.

These flashpoints – for Isla triggered by a casual comment from a stranger and for Mia by close friends discussing how long they have known each other – created a space where the two women temporarily became very aware of their adulting projects. Both Isla and Mia were ‘called into



adulthood' unexpectedly, and their stories evoke how unsettling this can be. With these anxieties in mind, we now discuss the three adulting motifs which for us expose the gendered mechanisms at play in HFUK. As suggested earlier, we begin with 'Getting in and getting on', i.e. narratives around recruitment and selection at the fund. We then turn to 'Breadwinners and egg-timers', which concerns how men and women made decisions around having children. Our final motif, 'The pram in the hall is the enemy of promise...?', discusses our participants' negotiation of parenthood, and the differences between motherhood and fatherhood more specifically, in this organization.

### **Getting in and getting on**

The size of the company and relatively long tenure of staff compared to the industry average meant that most participants could recall both how colleagues had been recruited and when. However, there was a marked difference between how men and women joined HFUK in these narratives. Although most were 'friend of a friend' type stories, nepotism was a recurring theme where women were the subject. One woman was said to have secured her job because her sister cleaned the Managing Director's house. Another was apparently given a position because her father was connected to one of HFUK's investors, and still another found her route in via her brother in law. All of these women were identified as high performers in their roles. But as accounts of getting into HFUK, these anecdotes also index women's movement into a sought after organizational context, offering high salaries (usually starting at around £45,000 a year at the time of data collection) and generous bonuses, the possibility of rapid career progression and all the glossy physical trappings of a financial investment house. A job with HFUK, then, is in objective terms a very 'adult' job, especially given the emphasis placed in both wider cultural terms and scholarly analyses on the transition into employment as a key marker of adulthood. Yet women were presented as needing a helping hand into this adult position, as opposed to getting in on their own merits. In contrast, men were discussed as having been selected for their jobs at HFUK by 'equals', based on evidence of past performance and job criteria.

This seems to us to be evidence of homosociality in this organization, of men being considered as deserving equals, and women less so. Homosociality appears again in Anna's description of how she and trading desk colleague Luca are treated. Anna (24) and Luca (25) are at a similar stage in their careers. However, Anna had the following to say:

"The thing I've noticed is, you know, Luca is also young. But [the trading desk team] treat him as kind of like ... 'Alright son', they call him, and with me it's just 'Hi' ... I never had the initiation thing ... of course I did in a way, but it was never, like I never had nicknames or anything..."

Luca is - admittedly - junior in both career terms and chronological age to the men who call him 'son', but there is still a recognized place for him in the HFUK 'family'; as the heir apparent,



perhaps, or the protégé. Our data imply that Anna (and other young women) was more difficult for these men to position because of her gender. So whilst Luca is an (aspiring) ‘equal’ because he is male, Anna is not and cannot be.

Relatedly, Kathleen’s fieldnotes suggest that Anna asked far more questions and proactively sought out opportunities or initiated discussion during quiet periods on the trading desk. Luca however was seated next to Harrison, the head of trading, and was automatically included in general discussions about market movements or trends. He therefore received an ‘organic’ type of mentoring, and did not have to second guess which questions needed to be asked to mine important information. Anna suggests that her professional development is a little more artificial as a result:

“I want to ask more questions than I do ... I do try and sit with Jamie [an experienced trader who has been with HFUK for a long time] quite a lot. But I mean he can show me it until he’s blue in the face but until I’m given the opportunity to actually sit there and make the trading decisions, it’s kind of on pause, you know?”.

Adulthood in the sense of getting *into* the ‘grown up’ environment of HFUK and then getting *on* within the fund already appears to be a gendered project. Women are not, it seems, perceived to be ‘as adult’ or are precluded from ‘becoming adult’ as their male counterparts due to subtle but exclusionary practices.

Other informal modes of professional development emerged through narratives around organizational mistakes. These suggest a gendered approach to discipline at the fund. When men made an error at work, they were often publicly criticized and usually had to endure being mocked. However, time was also taken to explain what had gone wrong, providing an opportunity to learn and move on and up as a result. By comparison, women often found out inadvertently they had done something incorrectly, or their errors were downplayed in front of them but discussed by others. In particular, learning from mistakes was more difficult for women because it seemed colleagues feared how they would react to having their errors pointed out. It also seems that this hesitance to tell women when they were doing something wrong is an element of the wider financial sector culture of ‘gentlemanly conduct’. So Hayley (27) reflected on her own training compared to a male colleague’s:

“When I see what [he] ... went through compared to me, it might be because we are bigger [as a company] now so things are more structured, but ... he gets bollocked all the time, which is a bit tough for him ... but as a result he is shown things that I had to pick up myself”.

Louis (50), relatedly, recalled that in a previous job “one of my team actively avoided doing female analysts’ performance reviews in case they cried”. Similarly, when Mia found out weeks later that



she had made an error, “I thought ‘Why didn’t they just tell me that?’ Were they scared I was going to burst into tears or something? That really bothered me”.

The proliferation of feminine stereotypes meant that Mia, as well as other participants, appeared well aware of the need to avoid coming across as churlish, even when explicitly asked to discuss her personal development by one of the directors. We understand this set of assumptions as putting women in the position where, if they complain about such treatment, they risk being seen as overly assertive or ungrateful for the compassion implied. Any refusal of the quasi-infantilizing process which apparently assumes that women are not tough enough to withstand criticism might therefore be counter-productive. Here again women’s adulting projects in HFUK are experienced differently from those of men, because the resources which are central to unimpeded professional development are seemingly not equally available to them.

### **Breadwinners and egg-timers**

As we have seen, the adulting process of entering and moving up within the organization was characterized by gendered mechanisms which meant women’s adulting projects were beset by different constraints to those of men. Relatedly, marriage and children were routinely constructed as key indices of adulting, which in their turn influenced narratives about career progression. Shelley (30) commented that

“When I think of my mum when she was 30, she had, you know, children, she didn’t have any parents, you know, she was married, *she was a proper grown up*” (our emphasis).

Shelley seems to define herself as failing at this point in time at her adulting project, because she has not acquired the appropriate ‘baggage’ of a husband and a family. Similarly, Imogen (25) says

“You feel very different being the young one, not long out of uni[versity], because you don’t have all that kind of stuff that you define as being sensible, adult, the[se] pre-prescribed life steps”.

Imogen also strongly aligns ‘becoming adult’ with marriage and children, and suggests that she is fairly immature – not just because of her chronological age but because, like Shelley, she lacks the ‘pre-prescribed’ accoutrements as yet. Lauren (30), on the other hand, commented

“from my home town, everyone’s got a baby now and it’s just like ‘oh, how depressing for them’. I don’t sort of feel ready for one, but then you do sort of sometimes feel like you’re being a bit left behind because they’ve got like the baby gang and you’re not part of the baby gang”.



Here anxieties around adulting re-emerge. Lauren implies these young mothers have had children too early, but at the same time she feels ‘left behind’ in not having had this fundamentally ‘adult’ experience. Perhaps even more revealingly, Izzy (34) says she has “run away” from the “marriage thing”:

“My mum of course will always say ‘No wonder, you can’t act your age’... [if] I were to base it on most of my friends, including the ones who say I should have two children, I should be well on my way to being senior in some sort of job”.

This recurrent emphasis on marriage and children in interviews that primarily focused on work indexes both how careers are always embedded in other life course choices and the narrowness of markers of ‘success’ in adulting projects at HFUK. Izzy highlights the pervasiveness of career or marriage + children as the only indicators of adult accomplishment in her suggestion that she has not excelled professionally, and so has no excuse for delaying marriage or motherhood.

Overall, perhaps unsurprisingly in the continuing absence of life trajectories which enjoy *full* normative equivalence with co-resident, heterosexual, married parenting, most HFUK participants espouse a very orthodox perception of what it means to be ‘grown up’. There are gender issues at work here too. These are most visible in Shelley’s and Izzy’s remarks about their mothers. Indeed the watersheds of marriage and children were, in the finer detail, framed in different ways by the men and women Kathleen talked with. For women the equation was relatively straightforward: ‘being adult’ = marriage + children. The men however tended to suggest that they would have children when they were in a position to *financially provide* for them and a partner who was not in paid employment, and perhaps also ageing parents. This breadwinner narrative was very rarely invoked by - or applied to - HFUK women.

In turn, men were described - and described themselves - as needing to work long hours, invest in training and development and move upwards regularly in the early stages of their careers, so they could ‘fast-forward’ their salaries before settling down. Isla suggested that:

“I think guys get more ambitious. At age 30 ... or 35, [if] they haven’t achieved something, they’d happily make some changes to do something or go and complain and ask for a higher salary... the girls are more opting for something steady and I don’t think they’re impatient. Sometimes you feel that just because the guy is louder he earns more. And you are equally as good or maybe even better...you’re not impatient, you don’t have the five storey house in the centre of London and it’s not the end of the world if it doesn’t happen by the age of 35. Whereas the guys, I think they feel pressure.”

Similarly, Andrew (40) commented:





“If it’s going to go under, then you need to do what you can to be employable, network, go to conferences, workshops ... *unless I want to put off having children until 2020*” (our emphasis).

So for Andrew the need for training was contextualized against a broader landscape of planning to ensure his longevity in the labour market. For him and other men, this planning orientated around providing financial support for others. Women on the other hand tended to identify training as necessary to maintain employability after maternity leave and/ or a career break; so they had skills allowing them to transfer to a more ‘child-friendly’ industry at a later stage; or to provide financial security should they remain or become single.

There were other gender differences in the narratives around having children especially. Perhaps predictably, several of the women invoked the stereotype of the biological clock, either as something they had internalized, something reflected in others’ perceptions of them and/ or something to resist. Zoe (30), for instance, referred to “all that biological clock bullshit”. On the other hand, whilst women were not seen (and often did not see themselves) as ‘adult’ until they were married with children, settling down in this very traditional sense was also constructed as moving them into the ‘post-career’ stage. In some ways they appeared to be on an inevitable trajectory to failure – they could not be professionally *and* socially fertile at the same time, *but were expected to be*:

“I think I feel that being female you can’t afford to get too much wrong at this kind of age ... I don’t want babies yet but I’m going to have to think about preparing for them, and also I need to think about my career now rather than later ... I was expecting, you know, I got to the interview here and they told me there would be pay rises – there’s been no pay rises. They told me there would be bonuses – no bonuses. So I did have a certain expectation of being a bit more comfortable than I am...” (Clare, 30).

Clare is concerned about not leaving childbearing too late (and so getting it ‘wrong’) but at the same time her career is not progressing as smoothly as she had expected. Her comments suggest that maternity leave and career breaks have consequences for women at HFUK beyond being temporarily absent from work, and that she needs to ‘prepare’ for this in professional terms. Indeed significant career progression in the fund did not happen until workers had spent a number of years building up skills, networking and completing professional qualifications. Promotions also tended to follow a period of long hours served and considerable socializing outside work to show commitment. As a result, as Imogen remarked, “it seems a cruel coincidence that the time when people start to rise up the ranks at a faster pace is often the time when women begin to have children”. Even more revealingly, her colleague Brian (39) commented:

“[A] perfect example is a friend of mine, my friend’s wife, she had a fantastic career ... loads of money, company car and everything like that. As soon as she fell pregnant – and



I hate to say this term, but it's true – she turned into a mumsy-brain. And that sharp young woman who was ... going out having fun ...earning the money, as soon as she started having children she turned into, there's no conversation there, it's just mumsy, mumsy, mumsy stuff. And she lost it. So I think women, to a certain extent, stereotypically, they have a point where they suddenly want to become a mother or they find themselves and they're a mother and, to the cost of everything else, quite frankly ... and it sort of gives way. Men on the other hand can just [g]o sailing through, even if they've just become a dad. It's hard but that's typically how it is".

In sum, since parenting was so fundamental to the construction of adulting projects at HFUK, negotiating both 'biological' and promotional trajectories was seen as extremely difficult for women.

### **The pram in the hall is the enemy of promise ... ?\***

There were also clear gender differences in the accounts of combining parenthood with work at the hedge fund. When HFUK employees became fathers, little seemed to change in their work-life dynamics so that "even if you've got children, you're expected on a night out, buying the rounds and staying too late – no excuses!" (Finn, 44). Similarly, Clare said of a colleague:

"Matt's just had a baby and I said to him 'Oh what's it like? Is it very different?' and he said 'No, I haven't noticed any difference at all'. I was like 'I bet your wife has!'. Just he isn't doing it! 'Get home, my dinner's on the table etc.'".

In terms of how adulting is played out through the perception and experience of parenting at HFUK, men can apparently combine the breadwinner version of fathering with the demands of work quite easily. They can also reap a number of organizational as well as social benefits if they have successfully navigated into a higher position as a foundation for fatherhood. But women either predicted or experienced a lot more difficulty in navigating career and mothering as two 'objective' markers of adulthood:

"Maybe this is just looking at the guys on the trading side, I can't say anything but you feel kind of bitter because they just seem to be able to have it all, you know, have a fun life, but they've got someone who's at home taking care of them. Whereas women in this industry I think it's much more tricky because, yes, it is competitive, fast moving. As much as I'd like [to] I don't think I can just stay home one year [on maternity leave]" (Ruby, 32).

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\* A common, and in this case deliberate, misquotation from Cyril Connolly's 1938 monograph *Enemies of Promise*.



She adds “I don’t have a single example of a girl having family and doing the same sort of job [afterwards]”.

Women with children or those who were planning to start a family drew on three strategies to negotiate motherhood in both organizational and domestic spheres. The first was suppression of their motherhood at work, as opposed to men who routinely talked about their children or displayed family pictures on their screensavers:

“I think the pressure is trying to prove, trying to act as though you haven’t had a baby and still do everything exactly the same ... It’s like you’ve got a puppy at home and it’s not like any difference ... That’s what I’ve found the hardest thing. Especially in [HFUK] ... I think in other companies it’s maybe different. Especially because everyone around, none of the girls have got children. So I’m very conscious of not talking about [my daughter] that much” (Lynne, 40).

The second was sacrifice, where time, financial resources and energy had to be carefully rationed. Isla says:

“I can’t be a mum the way I want to... at the same time I am not very happy to give up my gym membership and then sacrifice everything ... I would happily balance all the things that matter to me and then keep as much as I can”.

The final strategy was outsourcing, either through professional help or reliance on family members. Still, some women suggested that paying for childcare beyond the minimum required continues to be frowned upon for mothers in Britain:

“I’ve worked in Asia, right, you know, your life in public can be very different from your life in private because you get a lot of support and help and here in Britain you don’t. Well, you know, you go home, you have to do a second job, you have to look after your children, do all these things which are totally unpaid and unacknowledged ... Whereas in Asia, let’s not pretend about these sorts of things, it’s like ‘If I’m a woman, I’m educated and I will choose to [do] a whole well-paid job, I can always get hired help’ and no-one even thinks about or considers that as outside the norm” (Chloe, 32).

Others expected to call on parents to look after their grandchildren. Whilst this resource was apparently a product of cultural expectations in some countries, these women also talked about the conflict that it could generate:

“Even now [having my parents to stay] ... can be difficult, commenting on my heels or how I live. My friend, who has a successful career at [a British bank] says her parents make



her revert into being an adolescent again, scowling and throwing tantrums. I can imagine it's only going to get worse when I have children and they are here more often!" (Ruby, 32).

Here Ruby suggests that, while her parents might step in so she can combine motherhood and full-time work, such an arrangement could itself be infantilizing. Her comments index a potentially volatile combination of 'childlike' dependency on her parents and resentment generated by their interventions as part of this. Ruby seemingly expects to navigate the 'adult' markers of motherhood and full-time work by accepting the infantilization she predicts will accompany grandparental childcare.

The HFUK data also suggest that women carry the responsibility – or assume they will – for finding 'proxy parents' for their children when they return to work. So Hayley remarks

"Thinking about pregnancy, I only had this conversation with my mum, I'm not even pregnant and I ask[ed] her if she's going to be OK to come and help with the baby".

Moreover it was often inferred that, until women had 'significant' domestic duties, they were 'free' to provide substitute labour for their male colleagues. This released fathers to return home and fulfil what we might call their social adulting project. Imogen, for example, talks about "cashing in her favours" if at some point she becomes pregnant whilst Hayley refers to a fictional black book where she mentally stores all the good deeds she does for her male co-workers, with the expectation that these will be reciprocated when she has children:

"It's OK for me because I don't have kids, but others you can see it, if they work later, they say 'Oh I've missed bathtime', or they haven't got to go home to play with their kids, so it's good I don't have children so I don't mind taking a late shift or working late. They say 'You shouldn't be doing this, working long hours the whole time', but I say 'I'm just adding it up for when I have kids – it's all going into the book!'".

This expectation of reciprocity of course requires a stable staff composite, as well as willingness by all parties to remember these ad hoc favours. At the same time, women were hesitant to 'cash in' these favours in practice, as this may have been perceived as them not being able to cope.

## DISCUSSION

We have suggested that adulting is both a socially and organizationally situated project, and explored the ways that it played out in the gendered narratives of and about men and women at one UK financial services firm. While our corpus may have surfaced norms, beliefs and practices that are particularly notable due to the traditionally masculinist financial sector and to HFUK itself, our analysis also highlights how organizational adulting is a way of understanding the way ageing



is intimately connected to gendered mechanisms which help explain the persistence and reproduction of gender inequality at work. Now we tease out these relationships further, exploring the consequences for conceptualizing adulting as a site for the playing out of the aged and gendered mechanisms in organizations.

Returning to our research questions, to begin with we can see adulting as a process which is reproduced and embedded in gendered and aged expectations of professional early careers in ways that are correlated with young men and women. In particular, adulting reveals how particular gendered organizational practices are built upon age relations. On the one hand, the accounts by and about men in our study highlight how homosociality is reliant upon a generational flow of patronage and validation between protégé and elder statesman (sic) subject positions. As Williams *et al.* (2012: 559) suggest, “Youth can convey certain advantages to men, who may become the protégés of senior men. In contrast, young women struggle to get noticed in positive ways”. Through these homosocial relations, young men may therefore experience free-flowing mentoring ‘on the job’ at HFUK as opposed to a more orchestrated and ‘artificial’ version.

On the other hand, women’s socialization and careers were often characterized by the spectre of arrested development through cultural mechanisms. They were understood as needing to be ‘helped in’ by men and also experienced ‘getting on’/ ‘growing up’ differently. These age and gender relations echo the ‘gentleman’s club’ version of masculinity (Sinclair, 2005: 61, following Collinson and Hearn). It is based on a mixture of protectionism and paternalism, on the belief that men are ‘naturally’ projected to senior roles in organizations, so their career development is somehow assured. This is of course is a precarious position for women who, as suggested in other studies of ‘gentlemanly’ conduct (eg, Lorenz-Meyer, 2011), could be criticized as overly self-assertive, and unappreciative of good manners. Often this meant women in our study tended not to voice their concerns in this regard lest they too were viewed as ungrateful. Such positioning is also far from age-neutral, capturing women in the infantilizing position of being ‘nice girls’ (Reay, 2005) while also being required to show they can develop and advance in a heavily masculinist setting.

In both cases we see how differentiations emerge through age-coded gender relations. Key to this is the HFUK organizational context where success in professional occupations is garnered through tacit learning from colleagues as well as formalized training. This built-in dependency on others produces different gendered trajectories over time and can often delay or halt adulting projects in particularly gendered ways. Arnett (2004: 321, our parentheses) suggests that “the sense of being in-between [childhood and adulthood] occurs when emerging adults continue to rely on their parents in some ways, so that their attainment of self-sufficiency is incomplete”. Similarly, it appears that the dependent relationships fostered in HFUK through the criss-crossing of intergenerational and hierarchical relationships are key to individual adulting professional experiences. For men this may facilitate success through the expectation of taking over the mantle



at some point in the future, while for women it binds them to relationships that make it difficult to become an equal peer.

Turning to our second research question, gendered career trajectories were also marked by ambivalent and incomplete expectations surrounding becoming an adult. Career strategies for the men Kathleen interviewed were predicated on ‘becoming breadwinner’ – not so much in terms of actually having children but rather ensuring a financial platform that would enable them to support a wife and dependents. We can extrapolate from this a sense in which their achieving salary increases to enable them to build this financial security would then be rapidly replaced by a pressing need to settle down and reproduce. For women on the other hand, the emphasis was on an equally gendered futureproofing against what they saw as the likely infelicities of the mommy track. As such, they compromised and managed risk in order to continue in employment, rather than securing significant advancement. As Whittington (2011: 449) suggests of her female industrial scientists, this can create a kind of “occupational sorting” whereby women seek development opportunities to protect (as opposed to increasing) their earning potential going forward or quit the financial services altogether. Organizational demands and narratives are thus mutually reinforcing in how age-appropriate ‘achievements’, such as children, were navigated differently by men and women.

This gets to the very crux of adulting as organizationally embedded through its invocation of eternally focused future-oriented promises, sometimes referred to as organizational nostalgia (Ybema, 2004). Through this, adulting becomes the embodied experience of this nostalgia, indexed both through the way men and women absorb age-specific and gendered expectations about appropriate ageing, and how their projected pathways towards organizational success – or survival – were under construction as a result. Such deterministic expectations are also reminiscent of the ways in which some of Aronson’s participants spoke of career (un)certainly being gendered. In her study men seemed sure of their future success, needing only to ‘go for it’, whereas women planned for obstacles and setbacks in this regard (2008: 73).

It also means that gendered expectations of when and how family life and work move into and out of the foreground in our participants’ lives are present in the relations between different cohorts of workers. In particular, it was noticeable how the conventional web of gendered organizational expectations played out through younger women suggesting they often provided substitute labour for the fathers in their teams so as to facilitate the latter’s parenting. For example, they would take on part of the responsibility for managing male colleagues’ work-family balance, through working late so fathers can go home and see their children. Other sorts of arrangements (eg, to support mothers or younger men offering such cover) were not in evidence. Although de Janasz *et al.* (2013: 193) point to organizational “expectations that single employees without children should shoulder a greater share of the workload burden in particular staying late, working weekends and travelling more than their counterparts since they do not have family responsibilities”, in our data





these expectations did not seem to be imposed formally by management but rather an unequal system of collegiality created through age and gender-based lines.

For this reason, we suggest that gendered mechanisms at HFUK became a *stabilizing corollary* of adulting, and ageing more generally. Just as Pringle's lesbian managers felt an "implicit pressure 'to do' gender ... within a heterosexual frame" (2008: S115) at work, the pressure to 'do age' at HFUK occurred within the same frame. This pressure is obvious amongst men and women alike, in terms of them conducting their adulting projects in a chronologically-observant, traditionally heteronormative fashion. Although the consequent anxieties are felt quite profoundly, they are apparently viewed as an inevitable part of growing up and older, despite the aforementioned evidence of the 'deinstitutionalization' or 'destandardization' of the Global North life course since the 1960s (Mortimer *et al.*, 2008; Johnson and Monserud, 2010: 200). As such, the gender and age norms and expectations both men and women face within the culture of HFUK appear to be historically and culturally enduring. Indeed, when other markers surrounding ageing are far from settled in wider society, 'knowing your place' through a seemingly stable version of gendered, aged identity, even if it is a challenging or negating one, may provide welcome relief. For example, female participants reported specific strategies around navigating motherhood at work, predicated on upholding expectations that their professional life would carry on 'as normal' after becoming a mother and often expecting to have to do additional labour or a 'third shift' involving managing complex domestic systems of paid and grandparental help. Equally, men's emphasis on attaining a suitable remuneration package in order to support a family in the future commits them to the breadwinner version of masculinity. 'Knowing your place' like this is of course a dangerous and very possibly counterproductive pursuit. However, it highlights the importance of understanding gender and age as creating inequality through the tensions, frictions and destabilizations that are generated by the criss-crossing of these social categories of difference.



## CONCLUSION

In developing recent conceptualizations of adulting as not simply a socially important but also organizationally situated project, this article explored the interplay of gendered and aged expectations. Our findings suggest that greater attention needs to be paid to the numerous social-, industry- and organization-specific indexes that constitute women as “never being the right age” for workplace ambition and success (Duncan and Loretto, 2004). They continue to be beset by the importance placed on parenthood if they are to pursue an appropriate route to adulthood. Equally, motherhood itself results in a compulsion to invest considerable time, energy, and money in managing their identity projects in an appropriate way at work. These heteronormative expectations around the gender-age nexus in our study therefore seem to present specific challenges for women vis-à-vis the reproduction of inequalities in the construction of their careers.

In terms of implications for future research, the protectionism and paternalism which inform the career development of young men and women at HFUK suggests an especially fertile route for further investigation. It indexes a particular set of relationships between age and gender which generate certain dependencies and in turn certain types of career progression in the fund. There is also some rich ground for future exploration around Ybema’s (2004) organizational nostalgia and how gendered adulting in this organization encourages men and women to plan for their future careers in different ways. Equally, the complex ways in which men and women navigate parenthood – or, indeed, other caring responsibilities - in the workplace suggests gender-specific anxieties concerning the achievement of this persistent marker of adulthood.

Our study is of course not without its limitations. We recognize that our participants are privileged in employment terms, at least in terms of remuneration. Given that studies exploring youth transitions note the importance of class (eg, MacDonald *et al.*, 2005; Riach and Cutcher, 2014), it is likely that different socioeconomic cohorts will experience adulting in very different ways. Likewise, while our findings provide a valuable snapshot in time, it is not possible to know whether the anxieties or concerns our participants had in terms of gendered possibilities translated into consequences for their career trajectories further down the track. This speaks to a broader concern with studies focusing on ageing that draw on data from a temporally ‘flat’ methodology. We suggest that both of these aspects provide possibilities for future research exploring the experience of adulting in the context of gendered and aged work dynamics.

In sum, adulting highlights organizational ageing as a processual, dynamic interplay between the social roles of child and adult, but one that is informed by - and informs - gender and organizational discourses. Highlighting its importance in working lives, adulting disrupts the notion of stable ‘checkpoints’ as always characteristic of certain age groups. Instead, it destabilizes a sense of aged self: it is an ongoing and incomplete project which is equally subject to regression, restart and reorientation. As we have suggested, this can result in an overreliance on – and subsequent reproduction of - gendered norms.

Submitted on the 25 07 2018

Accepted on the 05 09 2019

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